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REVIEWS

Gail Rebhan, Photographer and Micro-Historian, Pictures the Intersection of NoMa DC’s Industrial Past and Problematic Present



By [Claudia Rousseau, Ph.D.](#) on June 23, 2016



Rebhan’s installation hangs in the lobby of 1200 First Street NE. Image courtesy of the artist.

The first things that strike a visitor to the lobby of 1200 First Street, NE in Washington DC are how busy it is and the disjointed character of its decor. On the far right side of this low-ceilinged modernist space is a large security/reception desk, with attendant, set against a wood-paneled wall. People keep walking briskly past it in and out of the front doors. Toward the middle is a collection of upholstered couches and chairs that during my visit was occupied by a group of earnest young women educators discussing a plan for a program they run in DC Public Schools. Totally unlike this, the lobby’s left side, lit by large steel framed windows, is furnished with a low couch, stools and a table all in very retro 60’s style, in similarly retro colors like lime green, rose and dark yellow. This, appropriately, is where Gail Rebhan’s site-specific installation is located. Commissioned for the Washington Project for the Arts’ “Lobby Project,” and supported by NoMa BID, the 6 x 17 foot fabric banner recollects the history of the location from c. 1915 – 1950 and beyond to 2016. Rebhan’s installation is a digital collage that, using images and text, communicates the changes wrought by time and the shifting of societal values and market forces. As the artist herself has said, “In urban areas, the past coexists [with] and informs the present.”

With that last idea as the keynote, Rebhan’s print is layered with imagery that was culled from a variety of sources, including the “Washingtoniana” division of the Martin Luther King Jr. Library, and the Washington Historical Society. Some materials were derived from the Library of Congress. A complete bibliography of all of her sources, as well as a text about the work hang next to the banner. Although the

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whole complex is a bit text heavy, the work itself is fascinating and engaging. Using Photoshop, Rebhan combines archival and contemporary photographs of the site, as well as bits of newspaper articles, maps and advertisements in varying degrees of opacity to connote the fluidity of time and space, and the ghostly presence of what came before in the very spot in which the contemporary viewer stands. As a micro-history of a specific part of NoMa, an area that has seen particularly rapid change in the past couple of decades, it tells a story that is not only informative, but surprisingly moving.



Overall view of Rebhan’s “Lobby Project” installation. Image courtesy of the artist.

Beginning with a pictorial map of the city published by the *Evening Star* in 1915, the background includes a bit of a 1796 map of Notley Young’s mill. The American Indians who first lived in the area, the Nacotchtanke, were long gone. By the 1790’s, Notley Young owned much of the land in the area and built a mill near what is now M and 2nd Streets, NE. The third largest slave owner in Maryland, Young owned 265 slaves, which implied enormous wealth, and his was one of fifteen families who owned most of what became the nation’s Capital.



Detail showing showing ice cream advertisement. Image courtesy of the artist.

The 1915 map shows the campus of the “Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb,” later Gallaudet University. Yet, by the early 1900’s the area was mostly industrial. Indeed, contrary to a prevailing myth that DC was never an industrial city, the historical evidence proves the opposite. Chapin Sacks Mfg. Company built an ice factory there in 1905—ice factories were very popular at the time. In 1908 they started making ice cream, and one of the images on Rebhan’s collage is an early advertisement for ice



cream as a nutritious food for children. The cream is good for them—and so recent medical advice would concur: the fat is essential for brain growth in infants and small children. The ad image is comical with what is evidently an older sister feeding a spoon of ice cream to her younger brother as though it were medicine. Although Chapin Sacks was the largest ice cream maker in the country, it was eventually taken over by Southern Dairies. One of the photo layers in the center of Rebhan’s piece shows the building with the sign of Southern Dairies Ice Cream boldly lettered on the front. It later became Sealtest (also pictured), and finally part of Kraft Foods which moved it out of the area. This sequence attests to the fact that DC was one of the first US cities to de-industrialize and many of the old factories and warehouses were torn down in places like “Swampoodle,” which has been rebranded by developers with the hipster moniker “NoMa.” In fact, the railroad line from Union Station to Baltimore, through places like Brookland in DC and Mount Rainier in Maryland were nothing but warehouses and manufacturing buildings. Even today, the US Route 1 corridor in Prince George’s County is filled with light and heavy industry along the rail line.



Detail showing the location of the Southern Dairies Ice Cream Factory. Image courtesy of the artist.

With Sealtest long gone by the mid-1970’s, a Safeway was there for a while, followed by a WMATA Bus washing facility, along with auto-body shops and similar small businesses. The gradual and in some ways precipitous decline in the area during this period is clearly suggested by these shifts in the landscape, including the loss of a profitable factory. What happened in this one location reflects the larger forces of de-industrialization taking place in the northeastern US during the 1970s as factory owners sought cheaper labor in the Carolinas, Mexico and eventually Asia. The completion of the interstates in and around DC in the early 1970s changed the way goods were transported rendering a once essential location along the marshalling yards of northeast DC obsolete. Rebhan’s layering of imagery with her typescript quotations scanned over them provides a simultaneous view that emphasizes these changes and what they meant in this specific context. The present twelve-story office building was completed in 2007, although its design is not distinctive. Nevertheless, the building’s very existence, along with that of all the other buildings recently appearing on that street and in the surrounding area reflect the dramatically rising land values of previously undesirable real estate produced by disinvestment existing in many older neighborhoods of DC. Yet, in the race to “improve” the area, creative aesthetics do not seem to have played much of a role. NoMa has effectively become something like an outdoor mall, with suburban-style chain retail and restaurants housed in buildings that are both sterile and architecturally void. Even the public art element, the work located in front of this building, *Torqued Tenisility*, in particular, was not created by a local artist, but “designed” by an architectural firm and is both derivative and meaningless, totally ignoring the rich history of the place where it stands; a history made evident in Rebhan’s banner.

Rebhan has previously created a suite of digital collage prints showing a similar approach to the same kind of changes that occurred in her neighborhood of Tenleytown and Foxhall.^[1] These were exhibited

at the American University Museum at the Katzen Art Center in 2011. A photographer and educator by profession, the artist has seen her medium as essentially about time, its progress and its effects. Earlier works show changes in sequential photos of the same person or persons over time, or of a place, like the interior of her son’s room over a week’s visit from college. Here the sequence is collapsed and focused into one image—a very large one—that, precisely because it does contain so much text blended with the photographic imagery, captures viewers’ interest and sustains it for a much longer time than contemporary art usually receives.

Part of WPA Lobby Project, Gail Rebhan, A Cultural History of 1200 First Street, NE; Washington DC 20002. Open Monday – Friday, 7 a.m. – 7 p.m. now through July 8, 2016.

[1] While the artist was primarily interested in documenting the changes there from a relatively disinterested historical point of view, it might be pointed out that those that have occurred in Foxhall and upper middle-class Tenleytown are very different from those taking place in NoMa. In these uptown neighborhoods, the changing landscape reflects shifts in taste, reutilizing commercial spaces in ways that address contemporary needs and an increase in density accommodating new and generally more affluent residents. These same have had a greater voice in the development process, while the changes in NoMa have wrought severe disruptions to long-term residents of the adjoining neighborhoods. It has also helped displace countless artists who worked in many of the old warehouses both in NoMa and in Union Market which has seen an increase in property value thanks in large part to NoMa’s redevelopment. The artist might consider including some of this information should she be asked to repeat the project in another lobby project in that area.

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Born and raised in New York City, Claudia Rousseau completed a B.A. in Art History at Hunter College (CUNY), and an M.A. and Ph.D. at Columbia University in New York. She is Professor of Art History at Montgomery College and is an internationally published scholar, a recognized critic and a curator of many art exhibits in the region. Dr. Rousseau was art critic for the Gazette Newspapers in Montgomery, Prince George’s and Frederick Counties for eleven years, publishing extended monthly reviews of exhibitions of contemporary art. In 2010 she received the honor of juried membership in the prestigious International Association of Art Critics (AICA) for her writing on art. Dr. Rousseau has served on many important art juries, including the Bethesda Painting Competition (the Trawick Prize), the fellowship committee for the DC Commission on Arts and Humanities, and the Awards Review Panel for the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County. She also serves as a panel member of the Public Arts Trust Steering Committee of the AHCMC, as well as the Art Review Panel at Maryland Park and Planning for public art.

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